

## **Medieval English Oral Tradition**

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For nearly fifty years, the medieval English oral tradition has been one of the most intensely studied of all the world's oral traditions,<sup>1</sup> but it has so far proved to be an extremely difficult one both to define and to understand. In addition to the issues that confront everyone who works with long-silent, entexted oral traditions—among which are fundamental questions about how a given culture's verbal art was composed/produced/presented/encoded/received—there are a number of other issues that are specific to the English tradition in the Middle Ages. Chief among these is that the tradition itself has quite understandably long been viewed as two largely discrete traditions, the Anglo-Saxon and the Middle English, rather than as a single, evolving one. The Norman Conquest brought about (or in some cases simply accelerated) many significant linguistic, cultural, social, and political changes, but the expressive economy of the English oral tradition—its richly associative oral poetics—survives the Conquest (in admittedly varying degrees of intactness) and continues to influence the production and reception of medieval English poetry even as the tradition itself grows and changes through its contact with continental traditions and practices.

The traditional “words”<sup>2</sup> of the English oral tradition—its specialized, meaningful idiom of lexeme, phrase, theme, and story-pattern—have been particularly hard for us to identify in texts from the post-Conquest period, in part because doing so requires that we recalibrate the oral theory that has been so profitably applied to Old English poetry and in part because we simply haven't looked for them in a systematic and thorough manner. Further, the understandable stress laid upon performance in the still widely influential theory of oral-formulaic composition has also contributed to our

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<sup>1</sup> See Foley 1985 and the updates to this annotated bibliography available at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the specialized nature of traditional “words,” see Foley 2002:11-21.

difficulty in defining the medieval English oral tradition. While a performative tradition must have existed at some point in England's history, the corpus of verbal art extant from the Middle Ages is by definition written, and so necessarily non-performative.<sup>3</sup> Whether *Beowulf* comes from the mouth of a dictating singer, from a scribe's best recollection of a heard performance, straight from the mind and pen of a scribe/poet, or through some combination of these and/or other possible means of composition and transmission, we need to recognize that the Old English poem is as fully a written text as is the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Acknowledging the non-performative nature of medieval English poetry will not forestall inquiry into the medieval English oral tradition, but will rather enable us to begin assessing more accurately the mix of oral and literate poetics found throughout the period's extant verbal art.

While oralists who focus on medieval English literature are currently pushing the theory in a number of new, promising directions, seeing the oral tradition and its entexted oral poetics as integral components of an extraordinarily complex cultural matrix, one in which the oral and the literate intersect with and deeply inform each other, is among the most promising and potentially most important ones.<sup>4</sup>

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### References

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<sup>3</sup> On non-performative Anglo-Saxon oral poetics, see Amodio 2004a and 2000: 196-202 on post-Conquest oral poetics.

<sup>4</sup> See further the essays collected in Amodio 2004b.

Foley 1985

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